Extracts from: *The Oxford History of the Holy Land* by Robert G. Hoyland (Editor), H. G. M Williamson (Editor), OUP Oxford, 2023

https://www.amazon.co.uk/Oxford-History-Holy-Land/dp/019288686X/

1. The Birth of Israel by Avraham Faust

Problems with the Narrative

…. the story is not completely uniform, and it includes some intriguing features. Thus, although Abraham continued to live for fifteen years after Jacob's birth, the story never mentions them meeting, and while Isaac, Abraham's son and Jacob's father, is mentioned in connection with both figures, Abraham and Jacob never interact.

Another feature that raises some eyebrows lies in the apparent contradiction between the account of the conquest in the book of Joshua and the description of the land that was not conquered (in both the books of Joshua and Judges). Thus, cities like Gezer, Megiddo, and Ta'anach, are explicitly mentioned as being conquered by Joshua (Josh. 12:12, 21), but also appear in the description of the remaining land that was not conquered (Judg. 1:27, 29).

These are but two examples out of many, and to such inconsistencies one has to add the growing discrepancies between the available historical and archaeological information we possess and some parts of the biblical narrative.

Thus, as we shall see below under the section 'Archaeological Background', during much of the period discussed, Canaan was under Egyptian rule, but this is not acknowledged in the biblical stories. And while such discrepancies, or missing data, might be explained one way or another, there are even more direct contradictions between the biblical narrative and the historical and archaeological data at our disposal; for example, cities that are mentioned in the conquest stories in the Bible (like 'Ai) did not in fact exist at the time when the stories are supposed to have taken place.

…. So how can we proceed and reconstruct the story of Israel's emergence in Canaan?

Archaeological Background

…. A series of events, beginning in the late thirteenth century and ending around the middle of the twelfth century, [1225 – 1150 BCE] marks the end of the Late Bronze Age and the transition to the Iron Age in the region. These include the fall of the Mycenean civilization, the demise of the Hittite Empire, the destruction of various major cities like Ugarit, and eventually Egypt's withdrawal from Canaan and its political decline.

As far as Canaan is concerned, these large-scale changes (marking the beginning of the Iron Age) were accompanied by a decline in many of the urban centres that existed in Canaan—mainly in the lower parts of the country—as well as by the emergence of two additional phenomena: the Sea People, most

notably the Philistines, who came from somewhere in the Aegean world or its fringes and settled in the southern coastal plain, and the Israelite settlement in the highlands.

The term 'Israelite settlement' refers to hundreds of small sites that were established during Iron Age I—beginning at some point in the second half of the thirteenth century [1250 – 1200 BCE] —in the highlands of Canaan in both Cisjordan [West of river Jordan] and Transjordan [East of river Jordan], and mainly in the area north of Jerusalem, in the region of Samaria. Most of the settlements were quite small, less than 1 hectare in size, and were not densely settled.

…. The association of these sites with the Israelites was based not only on the (rough) temporal and (more exact) spatial correspondence with the biblical testimony regarding the areas in which the Israelites settled but also on the clear connections between the culture unearthed in these settlements and the culture of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah of Iron Age II, as well as the reference in an Egyptian stela by a pharaoh called Merneptah to an ethnic group that he called Israel. The stela is dated to the late thirteenth century [1250 – 1200 BCE] and although the exact location of this group is not stated, most scholars view it as referring to the settlement phenomenon described above, or part of it.

The Israelite Settlement: The Growing Debate

While the Israelite identity of the settlers was not questioned until recently, there was a major debate on the process through which the settlements came to be.

[Peaceful Infiltration]

Albrecht Alt, a German biblical scholar, noted as long ago as 1925 that there is a discrepancy between the description of a military conquest of the entire country, as depicted in the main narratives in the book of Joshua, and the situation on the ground following the conquest as described in the narratives in the books of Judges, 1-2 Samuel, and the descriptions of the remaining land in Joshua 13:1-7, Judges 1:27-35, in which the Israelites settled only parts of the country, mainly in the highlands.

…. Comparing the Late Bronze Age Canaanite settlement distribution with that of the later Israelite settlement made it clear, argued Alt, that the Israelites settled in less hospitable regions that were largely devoid of Canaanite settlement anyway.

This picture, of settlement in sparsely populated and inhospitable regions, does not correspond with a military conquest in which the conquerors annihilate the entire country and can settle wherever they choose, but rather with a more peaceful, and mostly non-confrontational process in which the Israelites occupied the sparsely settled regions of the country simply because they were not populated and so were available for settlement. Alt, therefore, concluded that the Israelite settlement was a long, gradual, and mainly peaceful process, in which pastoral groups crossed the Jordan in search of pastoral lands, and gradually settled in the relatively empty parts of the country.

…. According to Alt, therefore, the conquest that is described in the book of Joshua never actually happened. Due to the way it reconstructs the settlement process, this school of thought is often called the peaceful infiltration school (or theory).

…. some scholars have suggested that various aspects of the archaeological evidence might actually positively support the pastoral origin of the settlers, for example the big courtyards that were reported in a number of the early settlement sites (like Izbet Sartah and Giloh) which probably served as corrals (the significance of sheep and goats can also be seen in the animal remains in the settlement villages).

…. All these traits are in line with the suggestion that the core group of the settlers came from a pastoral background, like the Shasu—tribal groups of pastoral nomads that were active outside the settled areas—who are mentioned in the Egyptian sources of the second millennium BCE.

[Unified Conquest]

William F. Albright, sometimes regarded as the doyen of biblical archaeology in its golden age between the two World Wars …. claimed that the story in Joshua is historical, at least in its general outlines, and that the Israelite tribes did conquer Canaan by force. …. this school came to be known as the unified conquest school (or theory).

…. Members …. stressed the sites in which the Canaanite cities were devastated and destroyed around the end of the Late Bronze Age (e.g. Tell Beit Mirsim, Hazor, Lachish, Bethel, and many others), while their opponents emphasized the sites which did not even exist at the time (e.g. Arad, Ai, Jericho), and the large gap between the destruction of some of the sites that were destroyed—about a century separates the destruction of Hazor and Lachish—which does not allow these destructions to be attributed to a single campaign.

…. in the course of the extensive study of the settlement process that evolved in the late 1980s and early 1990s [the unified conquest school was] gradually abandoned and …. left with hardly any supporters.

[Social Revolution]

…. mainly in the 1970s and 1980s, a new approach was developed (mainly by George Mendenhall and Norman Gottwald), which viewed the settlers as being mainly of Canaanite descent, and as local peasants who rebelled against their overlords, and fled to the highlands, where they met a small group of people who did come from Egypt, and together they formed liberated Israel'. Although this view—called the peasants' revolt or social revolution—was not directly supported by many scholars, it greatly influenced research and, indirectly at least, altered the academic discourse.

…. although it was very influential, especially by (indirectly) influencing scholars to develop additional scenarios in which Israel was no longer viewed as an outsider, the entirety of the evidence weighs heavily against it. Not only is there

no supportive evidence for this scenario, but many finds seem to make it very unlikely.

Thus, for example, if Canaanites from the lower strata of society were to rebel and flee to the highlands, …. would expect to find a major concentration of settlement in the nearby Hebron highlands. However, this region was relatively sparsely settled in Iron Age I.

['Longue Duree' approach, or the 'Cyclic Process']

In the late 1980s and early 1990s an even newer approach was developed (separately, and with some differences) by the Israeli scholars Israel Finkelstein and Shlomo Bunimovitz, who noted that when viewed in the long term the settlement process of Iron Age I was only part of a larger cyclic process of settlement and abandonment in the highlands.

…. <u>Finkelstein argued that settlement abandonment and decline (as between the Middle Bronze and the Late Bronze Ages) does not mean that the inhabitants died or left the region, but rather that they abandoned their settled way of life, and became semi-nomads within the very same region.</u>

Movement along the settlement-nomadic spectrum is a well-known phenomenon in the Middle East. Nomadism occurs when settlers change their main economic mode, increase their herds, leave the permanent settlement and come to rely mainly on their herds for subsistence. When the populations' livelihood is based on nomadic pastoralism, argued Finkelstein, they do not leave many material remains —hence the rarity of finds attributed to this era in the highlands. Such phenomena are known in the Middle East in various periods, even for reasons as mundane as overtaxation and recruitment to the army.

…. according to the new theory the population remained as nomads in the highlands during the following centuries, only to resettle in the late thirteenth and twelfth centuries BCE. <u>Thus, according to this view, the settlers were not outsiders, but rather local pastoral nomads who settled down after a few hundred years of a pastoral livelihood that did not leave much by way of remains in the archaeological record of the highlands</u>. Due to its reference to long-term processes …. this approach is sometimes called the 'longue duree' approach, or the 'cyclic process'.

The idea that all the nomads were local is unlikely. First, the end of the Late Bronze Age was a period of decisive population movements, which seem to have impacted the entire region. It is, therefore, extremely unlikely that the highlands west of the Jordan were alone left untouched by the social upheavals and migrations of the time.

…. even those who do not believe that a 'foreign intrusion' of population is responsible for the settlement should not exclude Transjordan as the possible place of origin of the settlers. This means that a 'local nomads' theory, which limits the potential origin of the settlers to Cisjordan, is unlikely, and does not fit the historical and geographical contexts.

[Evolutionary Approach]

…. This new trend towards viewing the settlers as 'locals', and not as a new population coming from the outside, eventually led to the development of a new school ('approach' would probably be a more accurate term), which viewed the highland settlers as Canaanites, who for some reason simply moved into the highlands and established new villages there.

According to this latter view the settlers were not revolting peasants or settling nomads, but rather agriculturalists from the lowlands. This last approach is best described as evolutionary.

…. the Iron Age I villages show evidence of sophisticated agriculture; hence the settlers were experienced farmers, and could not have been nomads.

…. As for the sophisticated agriculture argument, this is problematic on a number of grounds. …. even if the settlers were of semi-nomadic origin, they could still be expected to master agriculture after a few generations of settling down and practising it! Even more disturbing is the fact that evidence of the very same advanced agriculture is usually missing from Late Bronze Age Canaanite settlements, from which supporters of this theory suggest the settlers came.

[Proto-Israelites]

As for the best name to call the settlers, views differed greatly. Many called them Israelites, as the Merneptah stela clearly indicates that Israel was in existence at the time. Others challenged the 'Israeliteness' of the settlers, suggesting that we cannot distinguish Israelites from other groups that according to the Bible settled in the highlands, viewing the settlers simply as Canaanites.

Alternatively, a large number of scholars followed the lead of the American scholar William G. Dever in calling the settlers Proto-Israelites, acknowledging that their later descendants were indeed Israelites, but leaving the settlers' identity in Iron Age I, and that of the Israel that was mentioned in the Egyptian inscription, as an open question.

The Israelite Settlement: Assessing the Evidence

Notably, while strongly supporting their own preferred 'theory', many scholars in the 1980s and 1990s came to view the settlement process as a very complex development, accepting that it was not monolithic. In other words, the debate became more concentrated on the question as to which was the main mechanism through which the settlers settled in the highlands, and many scholars agree that all schools of thought are probably right to some extent, and that not all the settlers came from the same background, or that they all settled down following a similar process.

Israel's Emergence

The settlement process was, then, a complex one, and it involved peoples of various origins who settled in the highlands over a long period of time, and as a result of various differing processes. Opinions about the emergence of Israel vary greatly. Some scholars believe that the biblical narratives preserve much

history while others reject it outright. In the following, I will try to present a more nuanced reconstruction of the settlement process, reconstructing how Israel first appeared on the scene, and discussing how it gradually evolved as various additional groups were assimilated into it.

The Shasu and an All Israelite Identity in the Late Thirteenth and Early Twelfth Centuries BCE [1250 – 1150 BCE]

As noted above, the evidence seems to suggest that the first group of settlers was indeed an outsider group—probably of Shasu, as we shall see later in this section, coming from somewhere in the east or south. This group most likely crossed the Jordan peacefully, over a period of time, while interacting with the local sedentary Canaanite population, exchanging their herd product surpluses with grains produced by the sedentary population, and supplementing their own seasonal agriculture. This involved limited hostility, but only rarely full-scale clashes. After some time, however, the pastoral groups faced a very strong opposition from the Egyptian-Canaanite city-state system in the region.

The Egyptian Empire strengthened its hold over the region at this time, and consequently prevented these pastoral groups from interacting with the city-states of the lowlands. The pastoralist Shasu, therefore, had to settle down in the relatively vacant areas of the highlands, and to grow their own grains, since they could not exchange it anymore with the settled population of the lowlands.

The Shasu, however, were not alone. Additional groups of outcasts and displaced Canaanites were also shunned, and most likely joined them in the process. Identities are always created in contrast to other identities, and the highland settlers formed their identity vis-a-vis the Egyptian-Canaanite system of the lowlands.

…. Under such circumstances, in which the highlands were settled and isolated from the lowland settlement, the core Shasu group could easily have adopted some other groups that were similarly shunned by the lowland system, with all these groups united 'against' their common enemy or 'other', the Egypto-Canaanite system of the lowlands.

The Shasu and those who joined them are most likely the group which Merneptah mentioned in his famous late thirteenth century stela: Israel.

Over time the group grew in size as a result of both natural growth and the joining of additional members. Still, although composed of many sub-groups, with different histories and practices, until the middle of the twelfth century BCE the group as a whole (Israel) maintained very definite boundaries (as reflected in the archaeological record and in the distribution of the above-mentioned traits), in order to assert its unified identity and mark itself off from the Egypto-Canaanite system that dominated the lowlands.

The Egypto-Canaanite system was, therefore, the anvil on which Israel crystallized and defined itself, and which helped the various groups that gradually came to compose Israel to attain their common identity.

Stressing 'Israel' Again: The Eleventh and Early Tenth Centuries BCE [1099 – 950 BCE]

In the late eleventh and early tenth centuries, a new powerful 'other' became significant. The Philistines were newcomers from outside the region, probably from somewhere (perhaps from more than one place) within the Aegean world or its fringes.

…. The Philistines settled in the southern coastal plain as early as the first half of the twelfth century BCE, but they were probably confined to the coastal plain because of their hostile relations with the Egypto-Canaanite system. Gradually, especially towards the end of the twelfth and in the eleventh century BCE (after Egypt withdrew from Canaan) [1125 – 1000 BCE], they began to expand, and at some point started to encroach on the highlands.

The Philistines were the most powerful group in Canaan in the eleventh century BCE, with large and elaborate cities—Ashkelon might have covered up to 60 hectares and Ekron covered around 20 hectares, compared with Canaanite towns of only a few hectares, and Israelite villages of about 1 hectare or less.

…. Under such circumstances, however, the highlanders de-emphasized the importance of their local identities, and re-stressed their more inclusive one — that of 'Israel'—in order to face the common enemy.

…. Thus the Philistines became another anvil on which Israelite identity was forged and renegotiated.

====